INTEGRATING SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY AND ENGAGEMENT THEORY: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO FRANCHISEE-FRANCHISOR RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Franchisee–franchisor relationships are critical to the sustainability and success of franchise systems, influencing operational consistency and overall brand perception. This study integrates Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Engagement Theory (ET) into a unified conceptual framework that captures both transactional and relational dimensions of these relationships. Social Exchange Theory emphasizes trust, reciprocity, and fairness as foundational principles that shape mutual obligations, while Engagement Theory highlights the role of emotional and cognitive involvement as key drivers of commitment and performance. The integration of these theories offers a holistic perspective on how franchisee support services, leadership engagement, and regulatory frameworks interact to influence brand equity. The proposed framework enhances SET by incorporating emotional engagement, and extends ET through its inclusion of trust and fairness, thus bridging relational and engagement-based theoretical perspectives. Franchisee engagement is positioned as a mediating variable, while regulatory frameworks act as moderators in the enhancement of brand equity. This research employs structural equation modeling (SEM) and thematic analysis to validate the model and suggests avenues for future studies, particularly in addressing sector-specific challenges, cross-cultural dynamics, and the impact of technological innovations. The findings contribute to both theoretical advancement and practical strategies for fostering sustainable and competitive franchise ecosystems.

Keywords: Social exchange theory, engagement theory, franchise relationships, brand perception, franchisee engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Franchising has become an increasingly popular model of business expansion in the modern business world. Strong franchisee-franchisor relationships improve operational efficiency and enhance brand perception (Huang et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2023). The relationship between franchisors and franchisees is not just about the transaction; it is all about a network of cooperation, trust, and all parties working for the same goals. A good relationship ensures operational consistency, enhances brand perception, and fosters long-term business development (Huang et al., 2021; Johnson & Davis, 2022). This relationship, however, is subject to challenges because of different expectations, resource dependence, and levels of engagement in the relationships.

The dynamics between franchisee-franchisor relationships are very important, as these interactions will directly impact the performance and sustainability of franchise operations. Franchisors depend on franchisees to maintain the standards of a brand and ensure consistent customer experiences. On the other hand, franchisees depend on franchisors for support, guidance, and strategic leadership. This interdependent relationship can be a success only with good communication, trust, and engagement, so it really becomes a very significant area to be considered for research and practical applications by the academics (Kumar et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

Despite extensive research on franchisee-franchisor dynamics, critical relational aspects such as trust, emotional investment, and perceived equity remain underexplored. While much of the existing literature emphasizes operational efficiency and financial outcomes, these relational factors are pivotal in fostering cooperation, facilitating conflict resolution, and enhancing overall satisfaction within franchise systems.

Significance of Relational Factors

Empirical studies underscore the importance of intangible elements in the franchisor-franchisee relationship:

- Trust: A study involving 400 French franchisees revealed that trust in the franchisor significantly impacts both financial and job satisfaction. Specifically, the correlation between trust and financial satisfaction was 0.434, while the correlation with job satisfaction was 0.588 (Kalika & Lafont, 2008).
- Communication: The same study found that effective communication between franchisor and franchisee correlates with higher satisfaction levels, with correlation coefficients of 0.454 for financial satisfaction and 0.584 for job satisfaction (Kalika & Lafont, 2008).
- Fairness: Perceptions of fairness in the franchisor's procedures and interactions were strongly associated with franchisee satisfaction, showing correlation coefficients of 0.455 with financial satisfaction and 0.615 with job satisfaction (Kalika & Lafont, 2008).

Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

The application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Engagement Theory (ET) offers valuable insights into these relational dynamics:

- Social Exchange Theory (SET): SET emphasizes reciprocity and equity in relationships. In the franchising context, when franchisees perceive fair treatment and mutual benefit, their commitment and satisfaction levels increase (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).
- Engagement Theory (ET): ET highlights the role of emotional and cognitive engagement. Franchisees who are emotionally invested and cognitively engaged are more likely to contribute positively to the franchise system, leading to improved performance and satisfaction (Shuck & Wollard, 2010).

However, there is a notable gap in integrating these theories comprehensively to address the complexities of franchise relationships, especially under turbulent and highly competitive market conditions (Johnson & Davis, 2022; Nyadzayo et al., 2011). Without such integration, developing effective strategies to navigate these challenges remains limited.

Addressing the relational and engagement aspects within franchise systems is crucial for their success. Empirical evidence supports the significant impact of trust, communication, and fairness on franchisee satisfaction. Integrating theoretical frameworks like SET and ET can provide a more holistic understanding of these dynamics, enabling franchisors and franchisees to develop more effective strategies in navigating the complexities of their relationships.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to remedy these gaps by proposing a conceptual framework embedding Social Exchange Theory and Engagement Theory. By leveraging the strengths of the two theoretical perspectives, through the work of Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) and Shuck & Wollard (2010), this research will facilitate an in-depth understanding of how certain relational and engagement variables serve to influence the franchisee-franchisor relationship. The proposed framework will analyse the base constructs of trust, mutual respect, perceived fairness, and franchisee engagement and their impacts on brand perception and operational effectiveness, as supported by Huang et al. (2021) and Johnson & Davis (2022).

The overarching objective is to offer franchisors and franchisees pragmatic insights and implementable suggestions. The research, therefore, looks to enhance brand perception, increase franchisee satisfaction, and ensure the sustainability of franchise operations through the fostering of stronger relationships and greater engagement (Kumar et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2022). This holistic view is envisaged to advance theory but also to contribute practically in the strategic governance of franchise networks, addressing the complexities and nuances which attend modern franchising (Nyadzayo et al., 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Underpinning Theory

In franchising, understanding the dynamics between the franchisor and franchisee requires robust theoretical grounding. Two key theories underpin this study: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Engagement Theory (ET). These theories provide a comprehensive framework to explain how relationships, trust, and engagement impact brand perception, operational efficiency, and overall franchise success.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Social Exchange Theory (SET) explains the reciprocal nature of relationships and how individuals assess costs and benefits within interactions (Blau, 1964). In a franchise context, SET suggests that franchisees evaluate their relationship with the franchisor based on fair treatment, trust, and perceived rewards (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When franchisees perceive equitable benefits—such as operational support, marketing assistance, and fair revenue sharing—they reciprocate with commitment and loyalty to the brand.

Key Elements of SET in Franchising

- Trust & Reciprocity: Franchisees are more committed when they believe franchisors act in their best interests (Nyadzayo et al., 2011).
- Fairness & Equity: When franchisees perceive fair contractual agreements and support, satisfaction increases (Kalika & Lafont, 2008).
- Mutual Benefit: Stronger franchisee-franchisor relationships lead to higher operational success and brand consistency (Johnson & Davis, 2022).

Despite its relevance, many franchise studies focus solely on financial metrics, overlooking trust, fairness, and the psychological contract between parties.

Engagement Theory (ET)

Engagement Theory (ET) explains how cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement impacts individual and group performance (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). In franchising, ET highlights the importance of franchisee motivation, emotional commitment, and active participation in business operations.

Key Elements of ET in Franchising

- Emotional Engagement: Franchisees who feel emotionally connected to the brand invest more effort in business success (Kumar et al., 2023).
- Cognitive Engagement: A deep understanding of the brand's goals leads to proactive problem-solving and innovation.
- Behavioral Engagement: Actively engaged franchisees contribute to high customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Huang et al., 2021).

However, franchise research has not fully integrated SET and ET, limiting a holistic understanding of how relational factors impact brand perception and franchisee satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework for Franchisee-Franchisor Relationship

Based on the integration of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Engagement Theory (ET), the proposed framework explains how trust, fairness, reciprocity, and engagement shape franchise relationships, ultimately influencing brand perception and business success.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework
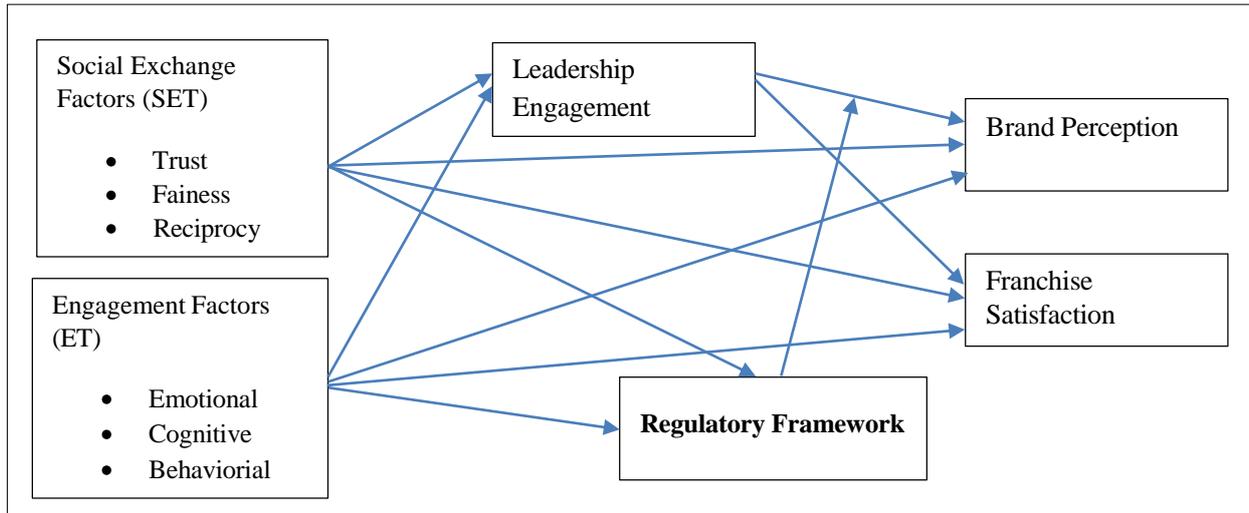
Hypotheses Development

- **H1**: Franchisee Support Services (FSS) positively influence Brand Perception (BP).
- **H2**: Franchisee Engagement (FE) positively influences Brand Perception (BP).
- **H3**: Franchisee Support Services (FSS) positively influence Franchisee Satisfaction (FS).
- **H4**: Franchisee Engagement (FE) positively influences Franchisee Satisfaction (FS).

Mediator Effects – Leadership Engagement (LSE) as Mediator:

- **H5a**: Franchisee Support Services (FSS) positively influence Leadership Engagement (LSE), which in turn positively affects Brand Perception (BP).
- **H5b**: Franchisee Engagement (FE) positively influences Leadership Engagement (LSE), which in turn positively affects Brand Perception (BP).

Mediator Effects – Regulatory Framework (RF) as Mediator:

- **H6a**: Regulatory Framework (RF) mediates the relationship between Franchisee Support Services (FSS) and Brand Perception (BP).
- **H6b**: Regulatory Framework (RF) mediates the relationship between Franchisee Engagement (FE) and Brand Perception (BP).
- **H6c**: Regulatory Framework (RF) mediates the relationship between FSS and Franchisee Satisfaction (FS).
- **H6d**: Regulatory Framework (RF) mediates the relationship between FE and Franchisee Satisfaction (FS).

Moderating Effects – Regulatory Framework (RF) as Moderator:

- **H7a**: Regulatory Framework (RF) moderates the relationship between FSS and Brand Perception (BP).
- **H7b**: Regulatory Framework (RF) moderates the relationship between FE and Brand Perception (BP).
- **H7c**: Regulatory Framework (RF) moderates the relationship between FSS and Franchisee Satisfaction (FS).
- **H7d**: Regulatory Framework (RF) moderates the relationship between FE and Franchisee Satisfaction (FS).

METHODOLOGY

Proposed Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate franchisee-franchisor relationships comprehensively. The quantitative survey will involve 150 franchisees, selected using a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across three franchise sectors in Malaysia:

- Food & Beverage (50 respondents)
- Retail (50 respondents)
- Education & Services (50 respondents)

The qualitative component will involve 15-20 in-depth interviews with franchisees and franchisors, using a purposive sampling method to ensure a diverse representation of business sizes, operational years, and franchise relationship experiences.

The rationale for using both methods is as follows:

- Quantitative analysis (Structural Equation Modeling - SEM using AMOS) will test the proposed hypotheses, including direct, mediating, and moderating effects.
- Qualitative analysis (Thematic Analysis using NVivo/ATLAS.ti) will provide rich insights into the underlying relational dynamics and perceptions that might not be captured through structured surveys.

The integration of these methods will ensure a comprehensive understanding of franchisee engagement, leadership involvement, and regulatory influences on brand perception.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data Collection (Surveys) A structured questionnaire survey will be administered to 150 franchisees, selected through a stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across three franchise sectors in Malaysia:

- Food & Beverage (50 respondents)
- Retail (50 respondents)
- Education & Services (50 respondents)

The survey will measure key variables using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), covering:

- Franchisee Satisfaction
- Franchisee Engagement
- Leadership Engagement
- Perceived Support Services
- Regulatory Framework Influence

Qualitative Data Collection (Interviews) Semi-structured interviews conducted with 15-20 franchisees and franchisors, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in business size, operational years, and relationship experiences. The interviews will explore:

- Leadership Practices
- Trust & Relationship Dynamics
- Challenges in Regulatory Compliance
- Decision-Making & Support Systems

All interviews recorded and transcribed, with thematic analysis applied to extract key insights.

Sampling Approach

The study employs different sampling strategies for quantitative and qualitative data collection:

- Quantitative Sample: 150 franchisees, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure industry representation.
- Qualitative Sample: 15-20 franchisors and franchisees, selected using purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives.

The quantitative sample size is determined through statistical power analysis, ensuring the robustness of findings (Huang et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2023). The qualitative sample size follows the principle of thematic saturation, ensuring sufficient depth of insights without redundancy.

This research design aligns with prior studies (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Shuck & Wollard, 2010), providing content validity for the constructs measured.

Analysis Methods

Quantitative Analysis The survey data will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS to examine:

- Direct relationships among variables
- Mediating effects of Leadership Engagement
- Moderating effects of the Regulatory Framework

Prior to SEM, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) will be conducted to validate measurement constructs and assess reliability, following guidelines by Johnson & Davis (2022) and Nyadzayo et al. (2011).

Qualitative Analysis Interview data will be analyzed using Thematic Analysis, employing NVivo or ATLAS.ti software to identify recurring patterns related to:

- Trust & Reciprocity
- Franchisee Engagement
- Regulatory Influences

The integration of these methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of franchisee engagement, leadership involvement, and regulatory influences on brand perception, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Practical Implications

Guidelines for Franchisors to Foster Trust and Engagement

To encourage the long-term expansion of franchising, governments should provide clear and consistent regulatory frameworks. These frameworks should prioritize equitable treatment of franchisees, expedite compliance procedures, and provide dispute resolution options. Collaboration among franchisors, franchisees, and regulatory agencies will result in regulations that combine operational efficiency with justice and openness (Chung & Luo, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2022).

Policy Recommendations to Improve Regulatory Frameworks

Strong franchisee-franchisor dynamics directly impact brand perception. Through collaborative and supportive relationships, franchisors can enable their franchisees to maintain consistent brand standards. An engaged franchisee who feels supported and valued is more likely to provide a good customer experience, reinforcing positive perceptions of the brand. Furthermore, strong leadership with clear supporting mechanisms fosters alignment between franchisees and the brand. This alignment contributes to a more dependable and harmonious market, as noted by Nguyen et al. (2022) and Johnson & Davis (2022).

Insight: How to Enhance Brand Perception

Strong franchisee-franchisor dynamics have a direct impact on brand perception. Fostering a collaborative and supportive relationship enables franchisors to ensure that franchisees consistently deliver on brand standards. Franchisees who feel valued and supported are more likely to reinforce positive brand perceptions through high-quality customer experiences. Additionally, effective leadership and robust support systems inspire franchisees to align closely with the brand's vision and values, creating a cohesive and reliable market presence (Kumar et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2022).

Theoretical Contributions

Advancing Social Exchange Theory by Incorporating Emotional Engagement Dimensions

However, Social Exchange Theory (SET) primarily focused on the transactional nature of relationships, emphasizing reciprocity and fairness. This study advances SET by introducing **emotional engagement** as a crucial dimension in franchisee-franchisor relationships. Emotional engagement recognizes that trust and fairness are not purely cognitive processes but are deeply intertwined with franchisees' emotional investments. This addition makes SET more applicable to modern franchise operations, where emotional connections play a pivotal role in sustaining long-term partnerships.

As suggested by Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) and Huang et al. (2021), enhancing franchisee satisfaction and commitment through a focus on emotional aspects of trust and fairness leads to greater brand loyalty and operational consistency. This evolution ensures that SET aligns with the complexity of relational dynamics in franchising, promoting long-term cooperation and mutual benefit.

Extending Engagement Theory by Emphasizing the Role of Trust and Fairness

Engagement Theory (ET) states that commitment and performance stem from emotional and cognitive investments. This study extends ET by embedding **trust and perceived fairness** as core drivers of engagement. The findings suggest that emotional engagement is strongly linked to franchisees' trust in franchisor support and their perception of fairness in operational procedures.

By incorporating trust and fairness into ET, this research provides a deeper understanding of how franchisee perceptions of equity and procedural justice influence their willingness to engage with the brand's objectives. Shuck & Wollard (2010) and Albrecht (2013) support this notion, arguing that regular and transparent communication is crucial in fostering such trust-based relationships. This extension bridges the gap between engagement and relational theories, offering a holistic perspective on franchisee motivation.

Bridging Relational and Engagement Theories for a Comprehensive Understanding

This study provides a theoretical bridge between SET and ET, integrating both transactional and relational perspectives of franchisee-franchisor interactions. While SET explains the mechanisms of reciprocity, fairness, and trust, ET emphasizes emotional and cognitive commitment as key drivers of engagement. By combining these perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how relational dynamics underpin operational outcomes and brand perception (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Nyadzayo et al., 2011).

Theoretical Implications

I. Strengthening SET with Emotional Commitment: Traditionally, SET has focused on rational cost-benefit analysis. This study enhances SET by incorporating emotional engagement as a critical element, recognizing that franchise relationships are built not only on fairness but also on emotional investment and perceived organizational support.

II. Expanding ET with Trust and Fairness as Core Drivers: The inclusion of trust and fairness as fundamental elements of engagement deepens the theory's applicability to franchise settings. Franchisees are more likely to engage actively with the brand when they perceive procedural justice and fair treatment in their interactions with franchisors.

III. Creating an Integrated Theoretical Model: By linking SET and ET, the study establishes a self-reinforcing cycle: trust and fairness (SET) lead to emotional and cognitive engagement (ET), which strengthens brand loyalty and operational performance. This integrated approach enhances theoretical models in franchising, organizational behavior, and business psychology.

Practical Implications

I. Enhancing Franchisee Satisfaction through Emotional Engagement: Franchisors should prioritize relationship-building strategies that foster trust and emotional commitment, such as personalized support, leadership engagement, and recognition programs.

II. Developing Trust-Based Leadership Practices: Franchisors must act as facilitators rather than contract enforcers, fostering a culture of transparency, participative decision-making, and fairness to enhance franchisee commitment.

III. Incorporating SET and ET in Franchise Training: Franchise training programs should integrate engagement techniques alongside operational guidelines, educating franchisees on the importance of trust, fairness, and alignment with brand values.

IV. Strengthening Brand Perception through Engagement: A franchise network that prioritizes both relational and emotional engagement will achieve higher brand consistency, stronger customer experiences, and long-term growth stability.

This study provides a groundbreaking integration of SET and ET, shifting away from purely transactional views of franchise relationships. By incorporating trust, fairness, and engagement, the research advances both theoretical knowledge and practical franchising strategies. This holistic approach enables franchisors to build sustainable, trust-driven, and highly engaged franchise networks, ensuring stronger brand perception and long-term market success.

Recommendations for Future Research Directions

I. Cross-Cultural Studies: Investigate how cultural differences influence franchisee-franchisor dynamics, particularly in terms of trust, fairness, and engagement. Cross-cultural analysis is recommended to explore whether trust and engagement relationships operate similarly across different cultural contexts (Kumar et al., 2023).

II. Technology Integration: Examine how digital tools, such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platforms, impact franchise relationships and operational performance.

III. Longitudinal Research: Conduct longitudinal studies to explore how franchisee-franchisor relationships evolve over time, particularly during periods of market fluctuation or regulatory changes. Data can be measured periodically across a 12-month timeline to evaluate changes in trust, franchisee engagement, and brand perception.

IV. Interaction with Other Theories: Elaborate the framework by including other theoretical perspectives, like Agency Theory and Resource Dependence Theory, which could provide further insight into the various dimensions of franchise operations.

V. Sector-Specific Analysis: Explore the unique challenges and opportunities within specific franchise sectors, such as food and beverage, retail, or education, to tailor strategies for improved outcomes (Johnson & Davis, 2022).

By addressing these issues, future research will be able to validate and refine the proposed framework and contribute to the strategic advancement of franchise management practices that ensure sustainability and competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

This integrated framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Engagement Theory (ET) provides a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics between franchisees and franchisors. By addressing both the transactional aspects as captured in SET, including reciprocity and fairness and the relational aspects as emphasized in ET, including emotional and cognitive engagement the framework highlights trust and engagement as critical factors in achieving operational excellence and enhanced brand perception.

This dual-theoretical approach contributes to both academic research and practical franchise management, offering insights into major challenges in modern franchising (Huang et al., 2021; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). However, while the theoretical model provides strong conceptual foundations, its practical relevance requires empirical validation.

Future research should test the proposed relationships using structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the hypothesized constructs quantitatively. Additionally, qualitative methods, such as interviews and case studies, could enhance the understanding of how franchisees and franchisors perceive and enact these relational dynamics. Expanding data collection across multiple industries would further ensure the model's generalizability, making it applicable across diverse franchise sectors (Nguyen et al., 2022; Nyadzayo et al., 2011).

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